CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name: Ryan Mountain

Proposed

Implementation Date: 5/6/08

Proponent: Compton Ranch

Location: Town 5 North, Range 3 West, Section 9

County:

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

Mosaic prescribe burning and mechanical fuel reduction (masticator) are being proposed.

The section has a problem with Douglas-Fir/ Juniper encroachment that, if left alone, will take over land that in the past had scattered Sage Brush and grasses. The Sage brush has started to overcome areas that had been mostly grass. By implementing the proposed actions, the DNRC should be able to create more AUMs (Animal Unit Months) and hopefully remove some of the larger water users that are decreasing the water spring outputs.

- Prescribed Fire With prescribed fire we will try to remove some of the Douglas-Fir/ Juniper encroachment and thin out some of the thick Sage Brush that may be choking out the natural grasses.
- There will be some mechanical treatment (masticator) of the larger areas of Douglas-Fir in the drainage where there is a natural spring. Hoping to get some of the larger water users so that the spring will run longer and have more water.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT. AGENCIES. GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED:

Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project.

In February of 2007 Leah Compton of Compton Ranch contacted the DNRC about the possibility of burning section 9 of Town 5 north Range 3 west, which they lease for grazing. The DNRC met with Leah and it was decided to rest the section from grazing for 1 year so there would be more available fuels to burn. Leah applied for and received a Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation grant to help fund the project. On March 18th, 2008 the DNRC, FWP, and Leah Compton took a tour of the site so all parties could get a good idea of what was trying to be accomplished and FWP could see what concerns they might have.

The following people were sent the Initial Proposal:

Compton's Neighbors, Ed McCauley and Paul Smith Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
Tom Hughes DNRC Hydrologist
Patrick Rennie, DNRC Archaeologist
Kevin Chappell, DNRC Ag/Grz Mngt Bureau Chief
John Grassy ,DNRC PIO
Jefferson Co. Weed Management Dist.
Jenny Sike, DFWP Biologist 495-3268 202-0884
Beaverhead/ Deerlodge National Forest
Local VFDs, Boulder and Bull Mountain
Elkhorns Working Group
Jefferson County Fire Warden

2. OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES WITH JURISDICTION, LIST OF PERMITS NEEDED:

In Jefferson County burning permits are required and can be picked up at a number of businesses and can be activated by calling Jefferson County 911 center.

Smoke Management is regulated by the Montana / Idaho Smoke Management Group

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

No action alternative: No prescribe burning. Only continued grazing lease activity would occur.

No burning alternative: The Douglas-Fir encroachment could be treated with mechanized equipment. The masticator would be the only action taken.

Proposed alternative: A combination of prescribe burning and mechanized equipment. A mosaic prescribed fire to help with the smaller Douglas-Fir encroachment and the growing number of Sage Brush. Use of a masticator to treat the larger Douglas-Fir.

III. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

- RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.
- Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.
- Enter "NONE" If no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.

4. GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE:

Consider the presence of fragile, compactable or unstable soils. Identify unusual geologic features. Specify any special reclamation considerations. Identify any cumulative impacts to soils.

The soils in the area proposed for treatment are in the Shawmut-Tolbert complex. Soils are stoney to very stoney on slopes 4-35%. There is moderate to slight risk of erosion from the types of treatments proposed. Any areas specifically disturbed by vehicle traffic or masticator operations should be seeded to suitable grass species and/or have other erosion limiting BMPs applied. The soil risk to a moderate intensity fire (116-520 btu/sec/ft) is low. No direct or cumulative adverse affects are expected.

5. WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION:

Identify important surface or groundwater resources. Consider the potential for violation of ambient water quality standards, drinking water maximum contaminant levels, or degradation of water quality. Identify cumulative effects to water resources.

This pasture has one spring and segment of intermittent stream as the only surface water for stock and wildlife. We have no hydrological information for this stream, how ever the lessees report that the stream flows much less than it did many years ago. A typical response in canopy reduction is an increase in spring flow. By removing some of the large water users in the drainages, we anticipate that more water will be available at the springs below the site. No direct or cumulative adverse affects are expected.

6. AIR QUALITY:

What pollutants or particulate would be produced? Identify air quality regulations or zones (e.g. Class I air shed) the project would influence. Identify cumulative effects to air quality.

The burning produces smoke. The smoke does have particulates which are known to cause health problems. We are a member of the air shed group and we plan our burns on good dispersion days. An additional function of the smoke modeling unit is to coordinate burn between all cooperators to reduce adverse effects

7. VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY:

What changes would the action cause to vegetative communities? Consider rare plants or cover types that would be affected. Identify cumulative effects to vegetation.

The FWP has expressed concerns about the removal of big sagebrush as a method to increase or improve forage over the long team, for livestock or for wildlife, especially in xeric areas.

The vegetation is dominated by big sagebrush, Idaho fescue, Bluebunch Wheatgrass, with some scattered Douglas-fir and juniper trees. The rangeland condition has decreased substantially since the mid 1980's. In the 1980's this range site was evaluated at 75% range condition. In the 1990's the range condition calculated to be 35%. This change is largely due to an increase in big sagebrush. It does not appear that grazing practices contributed to this significant decrease in the condition. The proposed project would decrease the sagebrush population substantially and this should also increase the native grasses and the overall range condition. There is some scattered Dalmation toadflax in the proposed project area. This noxious weed would be expected to increase as a result of burning. Aggressive weed control measures would need to be done after the proposed project to address this concern. It is expected that the proposed project would contribute to a decrease in trees and shrubs and an increase in grasses and forbs. Overall this would improve the range condition as long as the dalmation toadflax properly controlled.

8. TERRESTRIAL, AVIAN AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS:

Consider substantial habitat values and use of the area by wildlife, birds or fish. Identify cumulative effects to fish and wildlife.

The FWP does not support the removal of big sagebrush in regards to wildlife. Big sagebrush is important thermal and hunting-season cover for elk, mule deer, and pronghorn antelope, is important year-round for pronghorn, and is important winter forage for elk and mule deer.

The DNRC plans only to have a mosaic prescribed fire across the area. We have no intentions to broadcast burn the entire area. Our desire would be to only have fire on about 90 - 100 acres of the 180 acre area we are looking at.

The lessee is planning on performing a prescribed burn in the section they own directly to the North. The lessee is looking at burning a mosaic of an approximately 200 acres in a 350 acre area. In total there would be 300 acres treated of two whole sections, the burn would be in mosaic pattern with in 300 acres. Proposed actions are short duration and no direct or cumulative adverse affects are expected.

9. UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES:

Consider any federally listed threatened or endangered species or habitat identified in the project area. Determine effects to wetlands. Consider Sensitive Species or Species of special concern. Identify cumulative effects to these species and their habitat.

We have checked the Sage Grouse distribution map and no sage grouse habitat is located here or nearby. The project would mimic a low to moderate intensity burn designed to restore a semblance of conditions which would occur naturally.

Some wide ranging species such as Grey Wolf could pass through the area. Proposed actions are short duration and no direct or cumulative adverse affects are expected.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:

Identify and determine effects to historical, archaeological or paleontological resources.

There are no known archaeological sites in area.

11. AESTHETICS:

Determine if the project is located on a prominent topographic feature, or may be visible from populated or scenic areas. What level of noise, light or visual change would be produced? Identify cumulative effects to aesthetics.

The site is on the south end of the Elkhorn Mountains on a gentle slope and would be in limited view from the county road below.

12. DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AIR OR ENERGY:

Determine the amount of limited resources the project would require. Identify other activities nearby that the project would affect. Identify cumulative effects to environmental resources.

There are no other activities planned and only treating a small (180 acres of a section and not burning it all) area of state land. Proposed actions are short duration and no direct or cumulative adverse affects are expected.

13. OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS PERTINENT TO THE AREA:

List other studies, plans or projects on this tract. Determine cumulative impacts likely to occur as a result of current private, state or federal actions in the analysis area, and from future proposed state actions in the analysis area that are under MEPA review (scoped) or permitting review by any state agency.

Field evaluations have been completed on this land since the 1980's. Since then there has been a significant decline in rangeland condition.

1985 evaluation: 180 AUM (site potential listed as 249 AUM)

1995 evaluation: 180 AUM with Bluebunch Wheatgrass at 20% and Idaho Fescue at 20%, with no deduction for Douglas-fir and juniper cover in the central section range site (where the Rx burn is proposed). Range site

condition good.

2000 evaluation: 103 AUM

2005 evaluation: 81 AUM with Bluebunch Wheatgrass at 10%, Idaho Fescue at 15% and an entry of 10% cover

in Douglas-fir and Juniper. Range site condition fair

IV. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION

- RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.
- Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.
- Enter "NONE" If no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.

14. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY:

Identify any health and safety risks posed by the project.

The site is in some what of a remote area, only a few ranches with in a 5 mile radius. No direct or cumulative adverse affects are expected.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:

Identify how the project would add to or alter these activities.

There are ongoing ranching activities in the area; we hope to increase annual grasses by removing some of the sagebrush. We also hope to increase water output in the spring below by taking out some of the larger water users in the upper part of the drainage.

16. QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT:

Estimate the number of jobs the project would create, move or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to the employment market.

Project is going to be undertaken by DNRC staff, with some help from our cooperators. As well as heavy equipment but the project is of short duration that no effects to employment would occur.

17. LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES:

Estimate tax revenue the project would create or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to taxes and revenue.

No changes are expected.

18. DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES:

Estimate increases in traffic and changes to traffic patterns. What changes would be needed to fire protection, police, schools, etc.? Identify cumulative effects of this and other projects on government services

Proposed actions are short duration; we are planning on 5-6 days for burning and mopping up. A secondary benefit to the state is, live fire training opportunity for Initial Attack fire crews in this fire type. No direct or cumulative adverse affects are expected.

19. LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS:

List State, County, City, USFS, BLM, Tribal, and other zoning or management plans, and identify how they would affect this project.

No zoning in this area.

20. ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES:

Identify any wilderness or recreational areas nearby or access routes through this tract. Determine the effects of the project on recreational potential within the tract. Identify cumulative effects to recreational and wilderness activities.

Accessible state lands are available for recreational use with the purchase of a conservation license or State land recreational use license. The planned activities are in the spring when there is no hunting season and proposed actions are short duration and no direct or cumulative adverse affects are expected.

21. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING:

Estimate population changes and additional housing the project would require. Identify cumulative effects to population and housing.

No effects.

22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:

Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.

No effects.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:

How would the action affect any unique quality of the area?

This area is typical of the surrounding area and has no special or unique qualities.

24. OTHER APPROPRIATE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES:

Estimate the return to the trust. Include appropriate economic analysis. Identify potential future uses for the analysis area other than existing management. Identify cumulative economic and social effects likely to occur as a result of the proposed action.

Presently there are about 9 Animal Unit Months (AUMs) in the proposed project area. This is producing an annual return of approximately \$63 to the School Trust. If this area continues to be without fire or a shrub/tree removal treatment, then this will continue to slowly decrease the AUMs. I would expect the decrease in AUMs to be minimal, only about 2 or 3. If the proposal is implemented, I would expect the AUMs to double for the next several years. Revenues of \$130 could be expected annually if this proposal is implemented.

EA Checklist Prepared By:

Name: John Huston
Date: 04/18/2008
Title: Helena Unit Fire Supervisor

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

I have selected the proposed alternative, to conduct a prescribed burn and permit use of heavy equipment (masticator) operations as described above. These are lessee proposed actions, to be funded largely by the lessee and grant funding sources the lessee has secured. DNRC plans to assist with ignition and holding actions, as available, for the live fire training benefit this exercise has for DNRC seasonal fire crews.

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

The prescribed burn would simulate a small natural fire occurrence on this tract. The project is small in scope with the prescribed burn activity and masticator. I do not anticipate any significant direct, indirect or cumulative adverse effects to occur.

The lease improvement request will include post treatment spot chemical weed control to minimize any increase in noxious weeds and continuation of the lessee's biological weed control program. The pasture will be rested at least one growing season following the burning treatment, to improve re-establishment of vegetation. Masticator treatments for areas of larger (but sub-merchantable) Douglas-fir will occur later during the project, when funding and an available contractor can be secured.

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:				
	EIS		More Detailed EA	X No Further Analysis
EA Checklist	Name:	D. J. Bakken		
Approved By:		Title:	Helena Unit Manager	
Signature: /S/		Darrel J. Bakken		Date : 5/5/2008

